



CONVULSIVE BEAUTY

THE IMPACT OF SURREALISM ON AMERICAN ART

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Front cover:
NATHAN LERNER, *Eye on Nails*,
1940, printed 1978

Back Cover:
SEYMOUR LIPTON, *Pavilion*, 1948

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OCTOBER 5-DECEMBER 2, 1988

"I

t cannot be too strongly asserted that whereas surrealism is fantastic, all fantasy is not surrealist, whereas surrealism uses symbols, all symbolism is not surrealist, whereas surrealism often is profoundly disturbing, all that is shocking is not *ipso facto* surrealist." This is how Julien Levy, owner of the first American gallery to champion Surrealist art, concluded his essay on Surrealism, published in 1936. As Levy understood, Surrealism cannot be reduced to a stylistic movement or a list of concerns such as sexual fantasy, dream symbolism, and the bizarre. These are but the means to a search for another reality, a truer reality, more real than the reality of reason—a "surreality."

Indeed, when the Surrealist movement was founded in Paris in 1924, the artists claimed kinship with arts from very different traditions: not only with the French Symbolist poet Rimbaud and the German Romantics, but also with Hieronymus Bosch, the fifteenth-century painter of fantastic, visionary imagery, and even with Oceanic art. The range of these affinities seems to echo the variety of interpretations that the Surrealists had

of their own doctrine. Their work can be divided into two major "schools," a figurative and a more abstract one, but each artist also had an individual style. In fact, they were linked more by a Surrealist spirit than by a Surrealist style. The visible link, their interest in the bizarre, had a literally meta-physical origin because the Surrealist image reflects a world beyond that of common perception.

The poet André Breton, leader and theorist of the Surrealist movement, wrote in *Surrealism and Painting*, published in 1928: "I find it impossible to think of a picture save as a window, and my first concern about a window is to find out *what it looks out on . . .* and there is nothing I love so much as something which stretches away from me *out of sight*." This Surrealist belief in the existence of a world beyond our usual reach, and this trust in our ability to attain it, provided we set aside conscious reasoning, are attested by the historical supersession of the Dada movement in France (1919–22) by Surrealism. Even though both used strategies relying on chance and the arbitrary, Dada aimed at absurdity as a denial of social order, whereas Surrealism understood

absurdity as the mirror of coherence.

Surrealism is therefore more accurately defined as an ideology devoted to a search for truth, but a truth which lies beneath an orderly consciousness; and disorder—"the long, immense and reasoned disorder of all the senses," in Rimbaud's formulation—is the only means of access to it. "To make oneself a seer," Rimbaud proposed, one has to surrender to the unconscious and to its foremost expression, the *uncanny*. According to Freud, the uncanny is a familiar thing that looks strange because it has long been repressed. In 1924, Freudian theory was still revolutionary and sexuality quite "out of sight." Yet the acknowledgment of an omnipresent sexual "underlife" lent a hidden depth and a new historical meaning to the bizarre. The kingdom of darkness was given a new name: the unconscious. An imagery derived from Freudian associations thus appeared to be particularly apt for questioning the legitimacy of consciousness as the ruler of our understanding of the world. It is also precisely the experience of the uncanny that is described by Breton in terms of "*beauté convulsive*"—"*convulsive beauty*"—the magical

moment when the uncanny is acknowledged as more valid than the repressive force of reason.

The true sign of convulsive beauty is the expression of a doubt: a confusion between the animate and the inanimate; the living and the petrified; the masculine and the feminine; the human, vegetal, and mineral. Violent paradoxes and contradictory representations often suggest some monstrous transmutability, threatening the viewer with a sense of loss of identity. This Surrealist process of deformation was developed in two directions: Dali, for example, used the traditional representational techniques to create distorted images, whereas in Max Ernst's works, the distortion often derives from an innovative technique—pressing a glob of paint between two sheets of paper to obtain random forms. The Surrealist belief in the truthfulness and fecundity of unbridled imagination initiated a new freedom of experimentation among artists. Working against most of the rules of earlier art, they began a systematic exploration of new techniques in painting, drawing, sculpture, and photography. The device that seems to epitomize the Surrealist quest is automatism: the liberation of unconscious forces which will directly animate the hand. Because it bypasses representational coherence as the product of conscious activity, automatic drawing—like the devices that exploit chance—offers a more immediate access to surreality. Through its use, forms on paper, canvas, and in three-dimensional space approach the ultimate ambiguity and the ultimate freedom: “formlessness.”

since 1932 and the major Surrealist exhibition held in 1936 at The Museum of Modern Art. The somehow suspicious literary elegance of the doctrine and its tightly conceptual aspect remained mostly foreign to the Americans; however, the spirit itself came as a revelation. Instead of providing them with just another theoretical system, Surrealism offered an ideal—freedom—and a supreme value—truth—which encouraged the development of artistic identity, of individual expression.

Most of the American artists were drawn especially to automatism, which appeared to be the utmost expression of freedom of technique and the very path to one's own truth. But automatism was also the path that led out of Surrealism. The fascination for the device tended to overtake its original purpose: from a means of access to the unconscious, a way to veil and unveil the realm of dreams, automatism became ultimately a form reflecting itself, an abstraction. This paradox, which is contained in the concept itself, allows us to understand the process of filiation from Surrealism to its outgrowth, Abstract Expressionism, when freedom of artistic expression in the name of truth became somehow a freedom for its own sake.

Nevertheless, the artists who were to initiate Abstract Expressionism did not adopt automatism simply in order to pervert its Surrealist origins. It should be remembered that what originally attracted them to automatic strategy was its spiritual aim. In this spirituality they saw a way to fulfill their perceived mission as artists. In 1945, Mark Rothko wrote: “[Our abstractions] are finding a pictorial equivalent for man's new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex inner self.” And the works speak for themselves. Truly Surrealist painters are those who, aiming at some universal understanding, renewed the European repertoire with a new type

of primitive and mythical imagery that echoed a timeless collective unconscious.

The paradoxes and mutations that engendered abstraction in painting can be traced as well in photography and sculpture, which are both seemingly anti-Surrealist media: the first ostensibly captures “reality,” the second is physical and tangible. But both turned their handicaps into advantages. Photography, because of its apparent faithfulness to the visible world, can raise doubts about the accuracy of our perceptions by manipulating an imprint of reality into an imprint of “surreality.” As for sculpture, the new technique of welding metal freed artists from the traditional monolith and enabled them to create transparent structures of myth-making in space. This sculpture transcends its tangibility in order to stand for some materialization of the Surrealist dream. It succeeded in preserving the fundamental doubt: freestanding “drawings” define, deny, and magnify a space that is at the same time open and closed, present and absent—eminently surreal.

The critical literature usually maintains that for American artists Surrealism represented a model to be rejected. Although it is true that in the creation of the genuinely new movement of Abstract Expressionism, Americans did veer from the Bretonian concept of art as a psychological “window,” the two practices remained ideologically linked. Both searched out new forms in order to express otherwise unspeakable or unspoken truths. Even the most abstract work of art bears the imprint of the individuality that has created it. If indeed a line does not stand for some surreality, it does stand for the gesture—the “action”—that originated it. It still speaks for an “interiority.”

Natacha Kueic

From 1939, artist-refugees from the war in Europe carried across the Atlantic the Surrealist ideal of freedom, meeting expectations that had been created by New York shows such as those at the Julien Levy Gallery

PHOTOGRAPHY: Imprint of the Surreal

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.

—André Breton,
Second Manifesto of Surrealism, 1930

One of the primary goals of Surrealism was to find and fix Breton's "certain point of the mind," and photography was an important means to do just that. For Surrealist photographers, the medium could do more than simply document the real; it had the potential to reconstruct it in a way that revealed and accentuated the symbolic values of objects, spaces, and events. The Surrealists exploited this potential by isolating objects from their contexts, or juxtaposing them incongruously, manipulating negatives, or treating prints in provocative ways. Surrealist photographers used a number of techniques to create these effects, among them the photogram, in which random objects are placed on light-sensitive paper and exposed to light without the use of a camera; solarization, a process that exposes the print to light during developing; brûlage, where the negative is passed over direct heat or open flame, and is thereby chemically altered; and photomontage, which broadly refers to the layering of negatives or separate images. Also found

within Surrealist photography are the techniques of sandwich printing, where two or more negatives are placed in the enlarger to make a single print, and double exposure, where two images appear on the same frame, which occurs when the photographer does not advance the film in the camera. In addition to making use of these technical procedures, the photographers could stage, frame, or crop the objects themselves or position the camera to highlight the symbolic values of photographed images.

This photographic construction of reality as surreal—as a sign of the unconscious—ran counter to mainstream American photography, which was steeped in the realist tradition. Americans believed that the Surrealists' manipulations compromised photography in its struggle to achieve status as an independent art form. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, Surrealist ideology penetrated American art with the influx of European refugees and through various exhibitions and newly founded periodicals, such as *VVV* and *View*, both informed by European models. These influences freed American photographers from restrictive traditionalism and enabled them to transform the medium into a particularly strong vehicle for experimentation and self-expression.

An examination of the impact of Surrealism on American photography must begin with the expatriate Man Ray. Living in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, Man Ray was directly involved with the European Surrealist movement. In his Rayographs, which are variations on the photogram technique, he created ghostly apparitions of objects, obscure traces that seem to allude to the workings of the unconscious. Evoking the mechanics of dreams, these Rayographs—such as *Metal Laboratory Objects* (1922), *Contrasted Circular Forms* (1923), and *Bubble Emerging from Clay Pipe, and Frosted Leaf* (1947)—juxtapose



DAVID HARE, *Nude*, c. 1942



MAN RAY, *Metal Laboratory Objects*, 1922



LEE MILLER, *Solarized Portrait*, 1930, printed 1986

displaced and disjunct objects to suggest new meanings and associations.

Solarization was discovered jointly by Man Ray and his one-time assistant Lee Miller in a darkroom accident. Miller later employed this technique to question the conventional relationship between figure and ground. In *Solarized Portrait* (1930), for example, the figure and its background are equal in tonal value; only the contour separates them. Man Ray's *Solarized Nude* (c. 1930) also confuses the figure-ground relationship, but does so through reversal of boundaries and by the use of a reduced, more monochromatic contrast that simulates a negative print. David Hare used brûlage to much the same end in *Nude* (c. 1942); here, liquefied, molten areas interrupted by flat areas of black and white both define and distort the contour of the figure. All of these processes—Rayography, solarization, and brûlage—also display the Surrealist fascination with manifestations of chance.

The sandwich print and multiple exposure also work to disrupt distinctions between figure and ground, as well as between opaque and transparent, animate and inanimate. In Frederick Sommer's portrait *Max Ernst* (1946), Ernst's body is merged with the textured surface of the cement wall behind him. The body becomes diaphanous, inhabited by space. Val Telberg uses a similar process of combination printing to generate a Surrealist blurring of opposites. *Untitled* (c. 1946) is a photograph of a reclining nude superimposed on a close-up of a woman's face. Here, however, our reading is reversible; just as the nude actually delineates the features of the face, so too the face determines the anatomy of the nude.

In the pursuit of incongruous juxtapositions and multiple meanings, American Surrealist photographers often turned to photomontage to produce a heightened sense of either



VAL TELBERG, *Untitled*, c. 1946

representational or material qualities. Photomontage maintains a seamless photographic realism, even as it allows for hints of meaning and suggestions of desire—what Breton called “objective chance”—to be inserted by the artists. In Herbert Bayer's photomontage *Self-Portrait* (1932), we see a mirror reflection of the artist holding a severed cross section of his own arm, sliced and removed from near the socket. This kind of photomontage comments on two Freudian concerns: the operation of displacement in dreams and the anxiety of castration, as signified here by dismemberment.

The motif of the eye recurs in many Surrealist works in different conceptual guises: as both subject and object of the gaze; as an emblem of castration anxiety (associated by Freud with a fear of blindness); as a passage to the unconscious and as evidence of its workings. All of these connotations are suggested in Nathan Lerner's *Eye on Barbed Wire* (1939) and *Eye on Nails* (1940). The first photograph sets a soft, gelatinous eyeball on the surface of a rough, threatening field of barbed wire and dirt; the second inserts an entire eye in a bed of protruding nails.

A similarly provocative juxtaposition



HERBERT BAYER, *Self-Portrait*, 1932

is found in Clarence John Laughlin's double-exposed photograph *The Masks Grow to Us* (1947), which depicts a woman in a hooded cape. Here, the soft flesh of the left side of her face contrasts with the rigid, plastic, doll-like mask on the right. The image of doll as fetish or automaton was a favorite device of the European Surrealists (most radically employed in the *Poupées*, or *Dolls*, of Hans Bellmer). The doll functions in a similar way in Val Telberg's *Untitled* (c. 1948), where the traditional relationship between human and doll is reversed through scale and placement. With human hands, the doll holds a female nude; here, the human image becomes not only the doll's possession, but also the object of its gaze. In Ruth Bernhard's *Doll's Head* (1936), a disembodied doll's head rests on the hand of a wooden mannequin, the whole composition positioned in front of a strange wooded landscape. Once again, the powerful gaze, here offered by the doll, suggests a threat—one of blindness and (according to the Freudian equation) of castration. But at the same time, the construction of the doll as a fetish serves to disavow this threat.

By the late 1940s, many of the European exiles had left the United States and the Surrealist movement began to decline. But the influence of these European artists and the ideals of Surrealism itself had freed American photographers from the traditional restraints of straight, unmanipulated imagery, enabling them to seek out and capture Breton's "convulsive beauty" in the world. American photographers have used and continue to use Surrealist-inspired techniques and manipulations to address issues that go beyond Surrealism per se, issues such as feminine subjectivity, the direction of the masculine gaze, and how society constructs and perpetuates sexual and cultural difference.

Anne B. Wrinkle

PAINTING AND DRAWING: Images of the Unconscious

The American Surrealist painters, like the Europeans before them, developed essentially two distinct pictorial styles: one informed by the illusionism of de Chirico, Dali, and Magritte, which presented unusual juxtapositions of realistic images, the other closely related to the abstractions of Miró, Matta, and Masson, where biomorphic, organic forms and automatist theories inspired the artistic vocabulary. In addition to these stylistic devices, the Americans were exposed to a nexus of ideas brought to the United States by the Surrealist émigrés. Chief among these were the need for formal experimentation, the ideal of artistic freedom, and an

awareness of the unconscious. Yet the Americans, whether working in the illusionist or abstract tradition, developed an indigenous ideology of Surrealism.

The illusionist tendency of European Surrealism was taken in several directions by American painters. One group of artists—Man Ray, Federico Castellon, Kay Sage, and Dorothea Tanning—worked more closely within the ideological realms of the Europeans than did other American Surrealists. The highly finished paintings of Castellon use Freudian imagery and ambiguous signs to create mysterious settings. *The Dark Figure* (1938), a bizarre landscape, is inhabited by an



FEDERICO CASTELLON, *The Dark Figure*, 1938



ADOLPH GOTTLIEB, *Oracle*, 1947

apparitional cloaked figure and a large bodiless head cradled by several entwined bodies. The improbability of these strange environments and the bizarre elements within them creates a sense of unease. Tanning employs similarly oblique and dreamlike images; however, they are inspired by imaginative references to personal events rather than by Freudian theories. Sage, in *No Passing* (1954), evokes a barren, enigmatic landscape closely related to the architectural or theatrical stages of de Chirico; at the same time, the studied forms are similar to the shadowed biomorphism of her husband, Yves Tanguy.

A more distinctly American form of illusionist Surrealism appears in the work of those artists who concerned themselves with sociopolitical issues. In the 1940s, artists such as O. Louis Guglielmi, who developed out of the Regionalist tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, appropriated the hard-edged painting style of Dali, the architectural notions of de Chirico, and the unexpected forms and dreamlike

images of both artists—but for the presentation of specifically American social concerns. Whereas Dali, de Chirico, and their American followers probed the private realm of sexuality and the unconscious, Guglielmi and others working in the Social Realist tradition addressed more public problems: their new Surrealist vocabulary lent a special urgency to their protestations about poverty, war, and injustice. Far less didactic than earlier Social Realist imagery, such work projected psychologically provocative, socially effective “shock” images.

Philip Evergood represents another American manifestation of the illusionist branch of Surrealism. The psychological response engendered by his *Lily and the Sparrows* (1939), however, is not in the realm of social consciousness. The stop-action sense of movement and the oneiric setting, inspired by a chance viewing of a child seated at a window, recall the distant horror of a nightmare. The child's head and hands are distorted in size and shape, and her gaze seems



DOROTHEA TANNING, *On Time, Off Time*, 1948



ARSHILE GORKY, *The Pirate, II*, 1943



PETER BLUME, *Weathervane*, 1941 and 1943

inhuman, thus transforming the everyday act of feeding birds into a bizarre, surreal occurrence.

The work of Peter Blume serves as a convenient bridge between the illusionist tradition in American Surrealist painting and a second trend, that of abstract Surrealism. The hard-edged style and eerie dreaminess of Blume's still life-landscape *Weathervane* (1941 and 1943) bear a formal similarity to the work of Kay Sage and the Daliesque branch of American Surrealist art. However, the components cannot easily be decoded. At first glance, *Weathervane* appears to be a close-up view of an object, but this form is illogical, unreal. Blume in fact employed automatism, the technique most influential among the American abstract Surrealists, to create this grouping of unusual forms.

Whereas the illusionist tradition of Surrealism was concerned with the representation of psychological events or social problems, the abstract Surrealists, such as William Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Jerome Kamrowski, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Theodoros Stamos, were interested in a direct exploration of the unconscious through a Jungian focus on "primitive" art or through automatism. Both of these devices created a more immediate junction between the unconscious and the medium of painting.

In a joint statement published in *The New York Times* in 1943, Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko spoke of the "spirit" of "primitive" art, which also influenced Baziotes, Stamos, and Pollock: "Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then." These artists, and others, were attracted by the "immediacy" of such archetypal images, which they felt "were so vividly articulated by primitive man." They described their work of that time as "a poetic expression of

the essence of the myth,” an idea which is close in spirit to Jung’s theories of the “collective unconscious.” In this sense, the Americans diverged from European theories of the unconscious, which were more directly informed by Freudian ideals. In works such as Gottlieb’s *Vigil* (1948) and *Oracle* (1947) and Rothko’s *Untitled* (1945), mythical archetypes were deployed to tap what the artists perceived as primitive man’s direct link to the unconscious.

As the Americans expanded their definition of the Surrealist idiom, the cognitive reference to primitive imagery became less literal, less representational. In the movement toward greater abstraction, artists turned more to the unconscious through an exploration of automatic principles. In automatism, which is characterized by the almost complete dissolution of the representational sign, the American artists were directly influenced by Miró, Matta, and Masson. As in the work of their predecessors, biomorphic organic shapes engendered by the unconscious prevail. The artist seeks to move the brush without the intervention of conscious thought, thus forging a direct link between the unconscious and the canvas, a process evident in certain works of Baziotes, Kamrowski, Motherwell, and Pollock. The forms are freer in character and foreshadow the eventual movement toward almost complete automatism.

In the progression toward a more intrapersonal art, toward a more boundless ideological definition, the Americans not only succeeded in defining a new artistic spirit, but also in creating a distinctly American art. The probing of the unconscious in the form of automatism generated a catalytic evolution toward greater formal emphasis—later redefined as heroic “gesture”—and consequently produced the first inherently American modern art movement, Abstract Expressionism.

Aimée Holloway Conlin

SCULPTURE

Myth Making in Space

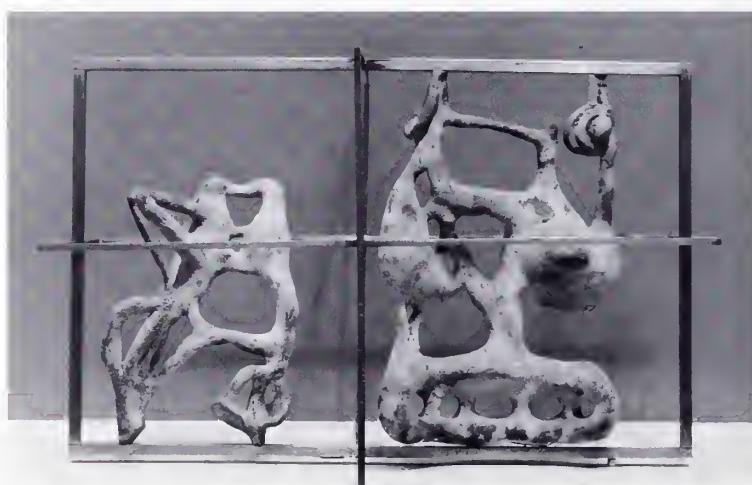
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etween the late 1930s and the early 1950s, American sculpture underwent drastic changes, as old practices were rejected and new styles from Europe were taken up. However, American sculptors refused to merely copy then-fashionable art trends or to be tied down to any one of the European movements, whether Cubism, Constructivism, or Surrealism.

The Freudian concept of the unconscious, however, as explored by the Surrealists, profoundly affected American sculptors. Though few of the original European Surrealists were involved in sculpture at this time, Surrealist devices helped to trigger the American search for new sculptural techniques and forms. For many

American sculptors of the forties and fifties—among them Herbert Ferber, David Hare, Ibram Lassaw, Seymour Lipton, Theodore Roszak, and David Smith—automatic drawing was the most influential Surrealist practice. In effect, they extended such drawing sculpturally into space, into three dimensions, by adapting the newly developed technique of free welding in iron and other materials. Many of these sculptors had seen works by Julio González, the pioneer welder who not only assisted Picasso with his Surrealist sculptures of the late 1920s and early 1930s, but was also an important sculptor in his own right. In fact, David Smith frequently remarked on González’s influence on his work during the thirties and forties. The use of the oxyacetylene torch in particular gave Smith the freedom to create metal works of metamorphic shape and open structure.

Many of the sculptors in this exhibition fused the formal geometry and rectilinear matrices of Constructivism with Surrealist expression. They translated Constructivism’s geometrical structures into cagelike scaffolds that encapsulated biomorphic forms. This visual conjunction both probed and unsettled the relationship between interior and exterior space. The cage became a means of making vivid the metaphoric element of the



IBRAM LASSAW, *Uranoged*, 1946

subconscious; it functioned rather like a stage, at once presenting and containing its insurgent-expressive contents as pictorial prisoners. The fusion of Constructivist geometry (the surround) with Surrealist biomorphism (the interior) helped produce dynamic, fantastic sculptures that finally displaced the old mode of direct carving. In addition to free welding, American sculptors such as Alexander Calder, David Hare, and Herbert Ferber also incorporated untraditional, "rough" materials (tin, concrete, iron, plastic, steel, copper, aluminum, wire, and rubber) as a means of attaining a technical freedom by which they could better realize new kinds of sculpture.

Alexander Calder was one of the first American sculptors to assimilate Surrealist forms. The biomorphic imagery of Jean Arp and Joan Miró, which Calder encountered during his sojourn in Paris in 1930, is evident in much of his sculpture of the 1940s. His amoeboid shapes especially resemble those in Miró's paintings of the 1920s. Calder's brilliance, however, was to recognize the three-dimensional implications of these configurations and their relationship to space—both to a real and to a metaphoric or cosmic-interior space. In his *Hanging Spider* (c. 1940), a many-appendaged mobile made from black-painted sheet metal, chance—that favorite intervening agent of the earlier Dadaists and Surrealists—plays an integral role: as the mobile moves through space, its shifts and turns are guided by indeterminate air currents.

It was Joseph Cornell, among all American artists, whom the exiled Surrealists in New York most admired. Cornell, in his box constructions, created a personal dreamworld related to Surrealist assemblage. Inside *L'Egypte* (1940), a Victorian oak writing- or strongbox, he carefully arranged rows of corked glass vials randomly filled with an array of small *disjecta membra* such as pearls, colored sand, bones, shell fragments,

rock specimens, doll parts, mirror shards, sequins, and an old coin. With its orderly rows and unpredictable detritus or worn "playing pieces," this sculpture conjures up not only a display case of lost or extinct wonders, but also a game board, which concretely projects the activity of the artist's unconscious. Because of the coexistence here of chance, of claims and charms of the past, and of implied but mysterious rules, *L'Egypte*'s game-board structure throws into question notions of the artist's free will, of conscious or well-regulated composition, and of individual authority.

Seymour Lipton was also interested in the Surrealist ideas of the game and the dream. *Pavilion* (1948), a hand-crafted, doll-size dream- or funhouse or abandoned palace, has no real center; yet it constantly invites our engagement. The viewer is able to look both into and through its open structure. Wires travel playfully in and out of geometric and biomorphic openings in the walls. All around the "pavilion," Lipton has welded pendant shapes, reminiscent of the anatomical parts of a flower.

During the years Ibram Lassaw associated with the exiled Surrealists in New York, he also studied Zen Buddhism and Taoism. His 1946 sculpture *Uranogeod* (urano = sky, geode = stone), which casts geologic, spongelike forms inside a stainless steel cage, suggests a strong fascination with the cosmos as psychic space. The space-projecting cage also recalls Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.* of thirteen years earlier. Lassaw saw this work exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936, and was fascinated by the idea of containing and qualifying space inside a cage. Lassaw depicted what was inside the cage by framing the contents in a fluid and unearthly space.

Many of Louise Bourgeois' wooden sculptures evince that other major Surrealist interest—the primitive and the totemic. Her comblike



ALEXANDER CALDER, *Hanging Spider*, c. 1940



JOSEPH CORNELL, *L'Egypte de Mlle Cléo de Mérode: Cours Élémentaire d'Histoire Naturelle*, 1940

structure *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1947–49) rests unsteadily on pink triangular legs that resemble large teeth. *The Blind Leading the Blind* is one of the earliest examples of environmental assemblage. Over six feet tall, its open-air structure at once tempts and repels the viewer from entering its threatening yet strangely inviting wooden “cage.”

David Hare’s sculptures of the early 1950s combine a whimsical and threatening quality derived from Surrealist art. *Juggler* (1950–51), an aggressively tall, seven-foot sculpture free-welded from steel, playfully spears upward and outward in all directions while resting on a narrow base. Hare welded large, seemingly weightless forms that branch out into space, like the limbs and twigs of a tree. His free-welded shapes, rather than enclosing a hypothetical or wholly “surreal” space as in Lassaw’s *Uranogeod*, pierce and occupy a real space.

These American sculptors of the 1940s and 1950s thus drew on the Surrealist strategies and motifs of automatic drawing (unconscious expression), the game (determinism and chance), the cage (interior space), and the totem (primitivism). However, they carried this vocabulary into three dimensions, giving it an unprecedented concrete and physical form. Their sculptural explorations of “interior” space—the personal space of the unconscious, often metaphorically “cosmic”—gradually erupted outward from a contained and completely private realm into the more public and participatory space associated with American Abstract Expressionism. Their work, in fact, prepared the way for later, truly indigenous American developments—Minimalism, Pop sculpture, and Earthworks—whose hallmarks are immediacy, physicality, site specificity, and assertiveness.

Michael Marco



DAVID HARE, *Juggler*, 1950–51

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth. Dimensions of photographs refer to image size.

PHOTOGRAPHY

BERENICE ABBOTT (b. 1898)

Jean Cocteau, 1927, printed 1981
Gelatin silver print, $13\frac{1}{16} \times 10\frac{5}{16}$
Collection of Berenice Abbott, courtesy
Commerce Graphics, East Rutherford,
New Jersey

Controlled Distortion, c. 1951
Gelatin silver print, $8\frac{3}{4} \times 7$
Collection of Berenice Abbott, courtesy
Commerce Graphics, East Rutherford,
New Jersey

HERBERT BAYER (1900–1985)

Lonely Metropoliton, 1932
Gelatin silver print, $14\frac{1}{8} \times 11$
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Julian Toub

Monument, 1932
Gelatin silver print, $13\frac{5}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{4}$
Collection of Herbert Lust

Self-Portrait, 1932
Gelatin silver print, $13 \times 10\frac{3}{8}$
Collection of Herbert Lust

Shortly Before Dawn, 1936
Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{7}{8} \times 13\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Herbert Lust

RUTH BERNHARD (b. 1905)

Doll's Head, 1936
Gelatin silver print, $7\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Herbert Lust

DAVID HARE (b. 1917)

Nude, c. 1942
Gelatin silver print, $12 \times 9\frac{1}{16}$
Philadelphia Museum of Art; The Louise and
Walter Arensberg Collection

CLARENCE JOHN LAUGHLIN (1905–1985)

We Are Alone, 1940
Gelatin silver print, $13\frac{5}{8} \times 10\frac{3}{8}$
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

The Closed World of Narcissism, 1941

Gelatin silver print, $13\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

The Masks Grow to Us, 1947

Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{5}{8}$
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

NATHAN LERNER (b. 1913)

Eye on Barbed Wire, 1939, printed 1978
Gelatin silver print, $8\frac{5}{16} \times 11\frac{1}{16}$
Coro Ehlers Photographs, Inc., Chicago

Eye on Noils, 1940, printed 1978

Gelatin silver print, $13\frac{1}{16} \times 10\frac{3}{4}$
Coro Ehlers Photographs, Inc., Chicago

HELEN LEVITT (b. 1918)

Knight in Horlem, c. 1940
Gelatin silver print, $7\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$
Lourence Miller Gallery, New York

Going, c. 1942

Gelatin silver print, $10\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$
Lourence Miller Gallery, New York

Untitled, c. 1942

Gelatin silver print, $7\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$
Lourence Miller Gallery, New York

GEORGE PLATT LYNES (1907–1955)

Blonchord os Boreas, c. 1938
Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{3}{8}$
Collection of Howard Read

Untitled (Vertical Nude Female Torso), c. 1940

Gelatin silver print, $9 \times 7\frac{1}{2}$
Robert Miller Gallery, New York

LEE MILLER (1907–1977)

Solorized Portrait, 1930, printed 1986
Gelatin silver print, $11\frac{3}{4} \times 9$
Staley-Wise Gallery, New York

Untitled (Nude Bending Forward), c. 1931

Gelatin silver print, $7\frac{1}{8} \times 6\frac{7}{8}$
The Art Institute of Chicago; Gift of Jean and
Julien Levy, The Julien Levy Collection

Solorized Nude, c. 1932

Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{3}{4} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$
Private collection

MAN RAY (1890–1976)

Metal Laboratory Objects, 1922
Gelatin silver print (Rayograph), $11\frac{7}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{16}$
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of the Simon Foundation, Inc. 72.130

Cantrosted Circular Forms with Pair of Optical Black Dots, 1923

Gelatin silver print (Rayograph), $9\frac{3}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{16}$
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of the Simon Foundation, Inc. 72.131

Solorized Nude, c. 1930

Gelatin silver print, $3\frac{5}{16} \times 2\frac{1}{8}$
Collection of Timothy Baum

Bubble Emerging from Clay Pipe, and Frosted Leaf, 1947

Gelatin silver print (Rayograph), $15\frac{3}{4} \times 11\frac{1}{8}$
Collection of Herbert Lust

Spider Lady, 1948

Gelatin silver print, $25\frac{5}{16} \times 14\frac{3}{8}$
Collection of Timothy Baum

FREDERICK SOMMER (b. 1905)

Untitled, 1939
Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of the artist, courtesy
Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Mox Ernst, 1946

Gelatin silver print, $7\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of Charles Seminsky

VAL TELBERG (b. 1910)

Untitled, c. 1946
Gelatin silver print, $6\frac{7}{16} \times 4\frac{5}{8}$
Lourence Miller Gallery, New York

Revolt of Dreoms, 1948

Two gelatin silver prints: top, $1\frac{3}{16} \times 9$;
bottom, 6×4
Lourence Miller Gallery, New York

Untitled, c. 1948

Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{7}{8} \times 8$
Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

WILLIAM BAZIOTES (1912–1963)

Green Form, 1945–46

Oil on canvas, 40×48
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz and
exchange 49.23

The Mannequins, 1946

Oil on canvas, 40×48
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of David M. Solinger in honor of John
I.H. Bour 74.106

PETER BLUME (b. 1906)

Weathervane, 1941 and 1943
Oil on canvas, 21×24
Collection of Billie Sue McCrory

FEDERICO CASTELLON (1914–1971)

The Dark Figure, 1938

Oil on canvas, $17 \times 26\frac{1}{8}$
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 42.3

Untitled, c. 1952

Oil on panel, $15 \times 19\frac{1}{2}$
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Weiss 79.69

PHILIP EVERGOOD (1901–1973)

Lily and the Sparrows, 1939

Oil on composition board, 30×24
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 41.42

ARSHILE GORKY (1904–1948)*The Pirote, II*, 1943

Oil on canvas, 30 × 36

Collection of Mrs. Jean Forley Levy, formerly from the Jean and Julien Levy Collection

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB (1903–1974)*Orocle*, 1947

Oil on canvas, 60 × 44

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Zucker

Vigil, 1948

Oil on canvas, 36 × 48

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase 49.2

O. LOUIS GUGLIELMI (1906–1956)*The Various Spring*, 1937

Oil on canvas, 15½ × 19½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Gift of Floro Whitney Miller 86.70.1

Terror in Brooklyn, 1941

Oil on canvas mounted on composition

board, 34 × 30

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase 42.5

GEROME KAMROWSKI (b. 1914)*Embalmed Universe*, c. 1940

Shadow box collage, 16 × 14½

Woshburn Gallery, New York

The Gorden Between Sunset and Dawn, 1946

Pressionage, 8 × 5½

Woshburn Gallery, New York

ROBERT MOTHERWELL (b. 1915)*The Red Skirt*, 1947

Oil on composition board, 48 × 24

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase 49.3

JACKSON POLLOCK (1912–1956)*Untitled*, c. 1933–39

Graphite and colored crayon on paper,

15 × 10

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase, with funds from the Julio B. Engel

Purchase Fund and the Drawing

Committee 85.16

Untitled, c. 1939–42

Colored crayon and graphite on paper,

14 × 11

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase, with funds from the Julia B. Engel

Purchase Fund and the Drawing

Committee 85.18

Untitled, c. 1939–42

India ink on paper, 18 × 13½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase, with funds from the Julio B. Engel

Purchase Fund and the Drawing

Committee 85.19a–b

MARK ROTHKO (1903–1970)*Untitled*, 1945

Oil on canvas, 39¾ × 31½

Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel, courtesy
The Pace Gallery, New York**KAY SAGE (1898–1963)***No Passing*, 1954

Oil on canvas, 51¼ × 38

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 55.10**KURT SELIGMANN (1900–1962)***Untitled (Preliminary study for cover of View, April 1943)*, 1943

Mixed media, 12½ × 10½

Collection of Timothy Boum

THEODOROS STAMOS (b. 1922)*Ancestral Worship*, 1947Postel, gouache, and ink on paper,
17½ × 23½Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 48.9*Legend of Dwelling*, 1947

Oil on composition board, 25 × 40

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of David M. Solinger, subject to life
interest 64.46**DOROTHEA TANNING (b. 1910)***On Time, Off Time*, 1948

Oil on canvas, 14 × 20

Kent Fine Art, Inc., New York

SCULPTURE**LOUISE BOURGEOIS (b. 1911)***The Blind Leading the Blind*, 1947–49

Wood, 74 × 96 × 18

Robert Miller Gallery, New York

ALEXANDER CALDER (1898–1976)*Cage within a Cage*, c. 1939

Metal, wood, and string, 37½ × 58¾ × 21

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman
Foundation, Inc. 75.23*Hanging Spider*, c. 1940

Pointed sheet metal and wire, 49½ × 35½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Mrs. John B. Putnam Bequest 84.41*Wooden Bottle with Hairs*, 1943

Wood and wire, 22 × 14½ × 10½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
50th Anniversary Gift of the Howard and
Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 80.28.2**JOSEPH CORNELL (1903–1972)***L'Egypte de Mlle Cléo de Méraude: Cours**Elémentaire d'Histoire Naturelle*, 1940

Construction, 41½ × 10½ × 7½

Collection of Richard L. Feigen

Untitled, 1950s

Construction, 18 × 12 × 5

The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial
Foundation, courtesy The Pace Gallery,
New York*Hôtel du Nord*, 1953

Construction, 19 × 13½ × 5½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 57.6**HERBERT FERBER (b. 1906)***Sun Wheel*, 1956Bronze, copper, and stainless steel,
56½ × 29 × 19Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 56.18**DAVID HARE (b. 1917)***Juggler*, 1950–51

Steel, 80½ × 27 × 21½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 51.34**IBRAM LASSAW (b. 1913)***Uranogeoed*, 1946

Stainless steel and cast alloy, 11 × 17 × 8

Collection of the artist

SEYMOUR LIPTON (1903–1986)*Pavilion*, 1948

Wood, copper, and lead, 24 × 14 × 25

Estate of the artist

LOUISE NEVELSON (1900–1988)*Moving-Static-Moving Figures*, c. 1945

Terro-cotto, dimensions variable

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Gift of the artist 69.159.1–15**ISAMU NOGUCHI (b. 1904)***This Tortured Earth*, 1943

Bronze, 28 × 28 × 4

Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., Long Island
City, New York**THEODORE ROSZAK (1907–1981)***Sea Sentinel*, 1956

Steel brozied with bronze, 105 high

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase 56.28**DAVID SMITH (1906–1965)***Perfidious Albion*, 1945Bronze and cast iron, green patina made with
acid, 14¾ × 4½ × 2½

Estate of the artist

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